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SHORT STORIES

EDITED BY C. ARTHUR PEARSON (OF PEARSON'S WEEKLY)

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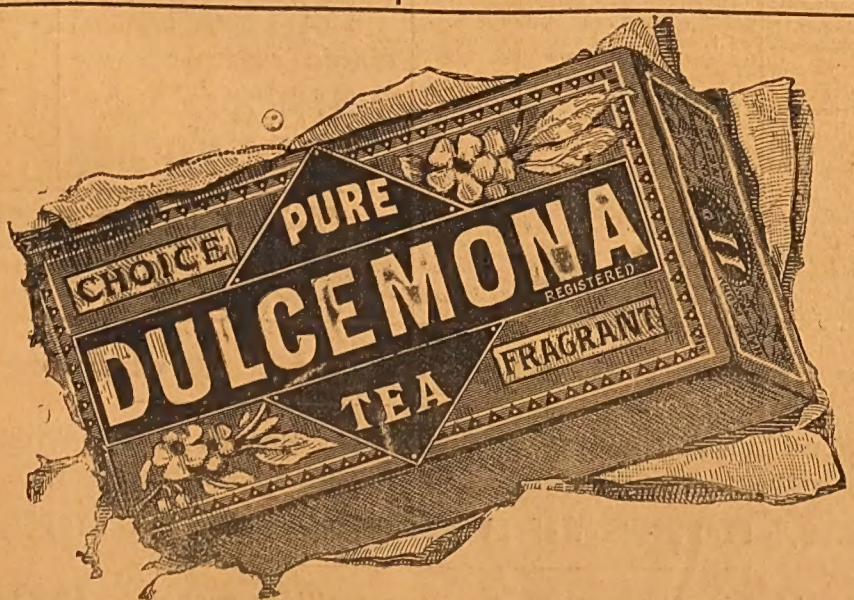

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SHORT STORIES.

EDITED BY C. ARTHUR PEARSON.

No. 339.] *FOR THE WEEK ENDING JUNE 20, 1895.* [PRICE ONE PENNY.

A MORAL THERMOMETER

THOSE who remember my father-in-law, Peter Trask, Esq., before he was my father-in-law, can have no doubts regarding a leopard's ability to change his spots, or the monotone integument appertaining thereto, for that matter. Then he was a terror that waked at all hours; now he is as gentle as any sucking dove. Then he was feared; now he is loved—and it speaks volumes for his legal skill that his practice has not suffered from the mutation. For a lawyer is like vinegar, the sharper, the more cutting he is, the more thoroughly is he supposed to have worked.

I had just graduated with honours at college, when I was placed as an articled clerk in Peter Trask's office. The selection was natural, but cruel, as things are apt to be. He had been a close friend of my father's—I never did understand my father—and was still the trustee of his estate. He was easily first among the lawyers in town, and being easily first, was also the crankiest, the ugliest, the most arrogant; the dread of the bar, and the torture of the bench.

I remember well the day I entered his private office, where he sat surrounded by books, like a bear with winter provender.

"Humph!" he growled, and eyed me from head to foot. How guilty I instantly felt that my hair was parted in the middle, and that I wore patent leather shoes; how regretful that I was not bald and shod with cowhide! "Humph!" he repeated. "So you are Edwin Gordon, son of my old friend James Gordon, hey? No wonder he died! What earthly use are you, eh?" And I sincerely wished that I was one of those distant hills to which his voice was so evidently directed.

"Do you imagine you can ever become a man like me?" he continued. "A pretty figure you'd make addressing a jury or a court!"

I faltered that I hoped to qualify myself for a lawyer.

"Oh, a lawyer!" he sneered, with an unpleasant laugh—that is, with his laugh. "Here, take this bundle to Mr. Matthew Sharpun, and leave these briefs at the bindery. And, mind, sweep out and dust the office every morning. That may take some of the law-school nonsense out of you."

As I passed through the outer room, old Stiles, the clerk, looked up longingly. "I wish he'd send me on errands," he said. "I'd willingly wear a Scotch cap and knickerbockers, that I would."

I must say it was a relief to be out of doors, though the weather was stormy; besides, I had a great curiosity to see Mr. Matthew Sharpun, of whom I had heard so much. He was an old friend of my mother's, a romantic old friend I've sometimes fancied; a man of substance, who lived on the outskirts of the town, and devoted his solitary bachelorhood to the investigation of scientific problems.

As I reached the corner of a bye-street, I came upon a young lady in a quandary. A pretty young lady, too, despite the knitted brows and pursed lips, indicative of that quandary. She was laden with two parcels and an umbrella, and at her heels was the daintiest little Skye terrier in the world—a knot of silver thread twisted around two diamond eyes. A tram was approaching, but she knew, and I knew, that the only unpaid advertisement on its boards was the commandment: "No dogs allowed."

"Permit me," I said, and in an instant the little terrier was safe within his mistress's wrap, and I held the umbrella and the parcels.

"Poor, dear little Judy!" sighed the maiden. "I do hope she won't catch cold." But Judy peeped out at me as if saying that it was not she that was out in the cold.

"You are so very kind," protested the young lady when she was comfortably settled, and I had cautioned the conductor to assist her in alighting, as she had a stiff arm.

And then I hurried away, wondering at the charming obtuseness which could so ingenuously blame parcels instead of terrier.

Matthew Sharpun himself answered my ring at his door—a tall, lean man, with a dark, kindly face, close shaven and deep wrinkled, and with eyes that shone with a melancholy humour.

"So you are Nellie Gordon's son," he began, and I half expected him to say that my mother ought to be dead. "Well, you resemble her a little, and that's high praise, my boy. And you've put your head into the legal lion's den, have you, and it isn't altogether snapped off? Come in and tell me how you escaped."

I told him.

"Trask is a self-made man," he explained apologetically. "There is no such lawyer as Peter Trask. The trouble is, that he knows it as thoroughly as he knows everything else."

"I think my appearance irritates him," I suggested.

"Any appearance irritates him except his own fiery visage, and if he could really see that, it would irritate him most of all. I do believe I am his only friend. We get along swimmingly, and I'll tell you why. I always ask him to do exactly what I don't want him to do, and, of course, he eagerly adopts the opposite. I might teach him a lesson if it were worth while. But there, get back to your work, Edwin. Remember you have a friend in me. If you get into trouble with him, it will be worth my while to teach that lesson, I promise you."

This kindly greeting encouraged me to persist at the office, and that afternoon an event occurred which fully determined me. I was sitting in the outer room when the door opened, and lo! the pretty young lady, prettier than before for the lack of the quandary, glided through into the awful *sanctum*

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sanctorum—Anglice, lair—beyond. Was I mistaken, or had there been a flash of recognition from dark eyes, tremulously recorded by smiling lips? If I was mistaken, that was an error which any man might be well content to hug.

Old Stiles, the clerk, was pottering away at his desk against the wall—poor old Stiles, in comparison with whose meekness Moses was a dancing dervish of impatience. An orthodox man was old Stiles; he believed firmly in eternal punishment, indeed, he sighed for it. "I think it would be cooler there," he said to me, one day, with a fearsome glance towards the rear room. Him I at once interrogated regarding this vision of loveliness.

"You'd better keep your eyes to yourself," advised old Stiles, in homely phrase. "That's Miss Alice, Mr. Trask's only child. He thinks almost as much of her as he does of himself."

Due reflection over, this excess of paternal affection might have made me cautious, but before I had time to consider, Miss Alice passed through again. I sprang forward and opened the door.

"Thank you, Mr. Gordon," she said.

"I trust you have fully recovered the use of your arm," I stammered.

"As you see," and she offered me her hand.

Another bewildering flash and entrancing reflex of a smile, and I was alone with old Stiles.

There was a Banshee wail, as if the north wind were having a convulsion. I looked inquiringly at old Stiles. "He's calling you," he said, with an indicative thumb, and a why-should-we-mourn-departing-friends' expression, and I hurried away to my doom.

"My daughter tells me that you were of some slight assistance to her puppy," Mr. Trask began. "What is that quotation about being wondrous kind? I beg to say that any such interference is as unnecessary as it is impertinent. Had they dared to molest Judy, a favourite of mine, and singularly attached to me, I would have taken away their licence in a five-minute argument. That will do; and don't let it happen again."

Mr. Trask's cool insolence made me the warmer. His contempt was a spur to my interest. A maiden is never so sought as when she is shut up in an inaccessible tower, especially if from the topmost window she waves her kerchief. Thenceforth I had one purpose—to overcome all obstacles between Alice and me.

A pretty young lady, too.

One evening I sat in old Matthew Sharpun's study before a cosy grate, and explained my fears, for my hopes spoke for themselves.

"I think I could teach Trask a lesson," responded Matthew. "It will be a hard one, and therefore well worth learning. He is universally disliked, poor man. And yet he believes himself to be not only popular, but beloved. Now, in my biological investigations I have observed that every emotion, whether pleasurable or disagreeable, causes a sensitive, impalpable essence to radiate from the person subject to it. I have discovered, too, a medium which infallibly responds to and indicates every variation of this ethereal emanation. Look here, what do you make of this?" and he showed me a small glass tube containing a blue fluid, which was delicately graduated and marked along its side with such stages as "Love," "Regard," "Indifference," "Contempt," and "Hate," reading from the bottom to the top.

"Why?" I replied, "This looks like a sort of moral thermometer."

Matthew Sharpun laughed aloud, as if taken with the name.

"Good!" he exclaimed. "That's exactly what it is. Now, if a man will wear this little instrument concealed on his person, it will indicate the exact feelings towards him entertained by whomsoever he may accost."

"Great Scott!" I cried. "No wonder its colour is blue."

"Now," continued Matthew, with an inventor's enthusiasm, "I propose to induce our self-sufficient friend to wear this silent monitor just for one day, and then we shall see what we shall see, or, rather, he will."

"But, how?" I objected. "How will you ever bell the cat?"

"Oh, I shall simply mention it in casual conversation with him as an amusing toy, and then say, 'But, of course, you wouldn't dare to wear it!' And mark you, Edwin, my boy, he would insist on wearing a hundred if I had them. What will be the consequences? Why, he'll find everyone false and hostile, except you, his faithful servitor. Naturally, then, will he cling to you and love you as a son. Besides, this rude awakening, this real view, may ——"

"Hold on!" I interrupted. "Your main hypothesis is a broken reed. Why, the moment I approached him the blue liquor would fly so rapidly to 'Hate' as to burst the tube, in all probability."

"I have provided for that contingency. Put these soles inside your shoes; they are composed of a substance which will completely insulate you. Your appearance alone will affect the register."

"I cultivate the constant smile of a Cheshire cat!" I cried exultingly. "Oh, when will the blessed experiment begin? I'm as anxious as a grand inquisitor to see him stretched on the gridiron."

"I will see him to-night," promised Matthew. "And so, courage and hope!"

The next morning, as I proceeded to the office with my feet very strong of sole, I reflected as to whether I should give Alice and her mother an inkling of this dread ordeal. In many ways Mrs. Trask had shown a limp and languid preference for my cause, this meditating revenge, amid the horrors of her connubial prison-house. Would they not both, then, redouble their fervour? But could they? Why seek for excess in intensity. Let them be natural. Trask's worst enemy could not ask for more. In their ignorance there surely would be no bliss for him.

Old Stiles was busy with some hurried task as I entered the office, and therefore undeniably cross, for old Stiles's conception of work provided frequent pauses for thought. I was scarcely seated at my desk when there came from the inner room an uproar as if a dozen steam boilers had exploded in unison, and old Stiles came flying out with a huge law tome after him. "Save yourself!" he shrieked. "He's tuk at last, as I know'd he would be," and he tapped his head significantly as he dashed out into the street.

I own I hesitated when, a moment later, I heard my name roared out on the trembling air. My flesh quivered, my toes

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contracted! Oh, lucky qualm, I felt the insulating soles, and from their mysterious substance I drew reassurance! With a smile, embodying the beatitudes, I boldly marched to my fate.

Peter Trask was standing in a familiar attitude, with his frock coat unbuttoned and his left hand holding out its lapel. So I had often seen him stand when about to address a jury; but now I knew the posture enabled him to consult the moral thermometer concealed within the folds.

"And you, too, you miserable——," he roared, and glanced, down. "And you, too, you ——," he repeated gruffly, and glanced again. "Oh, my good, true Edwin," he cried, in dulcet tones. "I merely wanted to ask you how you are getting on."

Ah, how I did smile as I answered that I hoped that I appreciated the blessing of my connection with him.

"I am sure you do, my boy," he asserted. "Your frank, ingenuous face shows your loyal nature. Will you come home to dinner with us to-night? The infamous duplicity of that reptile Stiles passes the bounds of belief. And I have warmed him in my bosom for years, and loaded him with benefits. But, there, I won't rack your soul with such enormities."

"My soles are undergoing quite a strain," I reflected, as we went out of the office together that night.

I actually felt a glow of sympathy towards the poor man as we progressed: he kept peeping quite timidly at the thermometer to see if there wasn't some mistake, and I do believe he wouldn't have noticed any difference in me had I taken the shoes from off my feet. Still, perhaps it is more prudent to be quite sure of the ground on which one stands. Moved, then, by some compunction, I administered the panacea of flattery so skilfully that ere he reached the house he was chatting naturally—that is, as if I were on the other side of the street.

A wretched tramp of a man lurched by with a meagre cur at his heels. "There goes fidelity," said Trask. "One can always rely on the affections of a dog. Why, our little Judy watches for me like a child." And, sure enough, scarcely had he withdrawn his latchkey when there was a scampering down the stairs, and there sat Judy, with devotion beaming from her bright, expressive eyes.

"You dear little thing—get out, you beast," roared Trask. And he kicked the astonished pup to the end of the hall. He had tested her "fidelity" with the moral thermometer.

The man shook as with ague. "That is too much. That settles it," he muttered. "Since there is one at least whom I can trust, I must bind him to me. Come in here, Edwin; I have something serious to say to you."

When we were seated in the library, he continued:

"Am I right in suspecting some tender passages between Alice and you?"

"I love her passionately," I protested.

"Then you shall have her, since thus I shall gain a son."

It was now my turn to grow pale, for I heard Alice's

He showed me a small glass tube.

Hid his fiery visage in his wife's lap.

approaching steps. I knew her frank, ingenuous nature. Supposing her father should apply his test? Evidently a like thought occurred to him, for he shivered and buttoned his coat tightly around him. After explanations and ecstasies had somewhat moderated: "Where is your mother, my child?" asked Peter Trask.

"She is lying down. She is not feeling very well, but nothing out of the ordinary," explained Alice, coldly.

"I will go to her at once."

"Oh, no, she didn't even want me with her! She craves rest and quiet."

"Then I will go for the doctor," and despite a gesture of restraint, he rushed away.

"An extraordinary, inexplicable interest," said Alice bitterly. "Poor mamma! As if any one could administer to a broken heart!"

We waited. Ere long there were whispers in the hall, and then a single professional tread up the stairs. Soon the dignified steps returned, and an unctuous voice spoke. "Our patient is doing finely," the doctor reported to Peter Trask. "No organic trouble; only a lowering of the nervous system, only a lack of life. I will call in the morning."

"Only a lack of life!" moaned poor Trask, as he joined us. "Come, my children, let us tell your engagement to mother; it may please her;" and we went upstairs into the sitting-room, where the invalid lay on the couch.

"See, my dear," said Peter Trask. "These young people think they love each other. Perhaps they do; but I doubt if they can be as happy as we used to be; as, as happy as—we might be." And he knelt and hid his fiery visage in his wife's lap.

I have, I think, described Mrs. Trask as limp and languid from the horrors of her connubial prison-house, and so truly she had appeared to me. But now I witnessed a wondrous transformation. Her wan and sunken cheeks grew rosy; her dull eyes softened with reminiscent tenderness. She smiled; and if ever a smile spoke, that smile uttered a blessing.

"Why, Peter, why, my own true hubby," she murmured, "one would think that the dear old days had returned, and you were my ardent fair-haired lover again"; and she stroked the shiny surface where that fair hair had been.

Peter Trask staggered to his feet and over to the light. He unbuttoned his coat, and looked down through tear-dimmed eyes. There stood the blue fluid, in the moral thermometer, constant and serene at "Love."

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THEY were telling stories of hunting and adventure after dinner. An old friend of ours, M. Boniface—a mighty Nimrod and great drinker of wine; a gay, robust man, full of spirit, of wit, of philosophy; a mocking, resigned philosophy that manifested itself in cutting witticisms, but never in sadness—said suddenly: "I know a hunting story, or, rather, a hunting drama. Strange enough, it is not at all like the general run of such stories. I have never related it, thinking that it would not be amusing. It is not a sympathetic story, you understand. That is, it has not that interest that stirs one, or charms or touches one.

"Here is the story:

"When this occurred I was about thirty-five years old and a keen hunter. I owned at that time a very isolated farm in the environs of Jumieges, surrounded by forests and well stocked with hares and rabbits. I passed only three or four days in the year there, and always alone, because the arrangement of the place did not provide accommodation for a friend. I had placed there as a guard an old retired gendarme, a brave, rather violent man, a terror to poachers, strict in his discipline, and afraid of nothing. He lived alone, far from the village, in a little house, or rather hovel, consisting of two rooms below, a kitchen and cellar, and two rooms above. One of them, which was nothing but a box, just big enough for a bed, a cupboard and a chair, was reserved for me. Father Cavalier occupied the other. When I said he lived alone in the lodge I did not express myself clearly. He had taken his nephew to live with him. He was a worthless fellow of some fourteen years, who went errands to the village, three kilomètres distant, and helped his uncle in his daily cares.

"This scapegrace, tall and crooked, had yellow hair—so light that it looked like the down on a duck's breast; so thin that he looked as though he was bald. He had enormous feet and giant hands, the hands of a colossus. He squinted a little and never looked anyone straight in the face. He seemed to me to hold the same place in the human race that poisonous beasts do in the animal kingdom. The fellow was a human fox or polecat. During my short visits at the 'Pavilion'—I called this hut the Pavilion—Marius gave up the niche to an old woman, Céleste, from Ecorcheville, who came to look after the cooking, the efforts of Père Cavalier in that line being insufficient.

"Now you know the place and the characters let us proceed to the adventure. It was on October 15, 1854. I remember the date distinctly, and I shall never forget it. I went to Rouen on horseback, followed by my dog, Bock, a great Dalmatian hound, broad chested, with massive jaws. He beat the bushes for game like a spaniel from Pont Andemer. I carried my travelling bag on the crupper, my gun slung over my shoulder. It was a cold day, with great gloomy clouds flitting across the sky and a strong wind howling.

"As I climbed up Cantelère, I looked away over the vast valley through which the Seine wound like a serpent. The towers of Rouen touched the sky to the left, and far off on the right stretched the wood-covered fields. For ten years at that same time I had presented myself in the same fashion, and the same words from the same lips had greeted me:

"'Good day, monsieur. Is your health satisfactory?' Cavalier had not changed.

"The old woman, a devoted soul, always seemed moved when she saw me, and every time I left would say: 'I think this may be the last time, our dear master.'

"This desolate, timid farewell of the poor old servant, this enforced resignation and expectation of her approaching death, always touched my heart.

"I got off my horse. Cavalier, after shaking my hand warmly, led the horse away to the little building that served as a stable, and followed Céleste into the kitchen, that was also used as a dining-room. There the keeper joined me.

"I saw at once that he did not look as usual. He seemed pre-occupied, ill at ease, anxious. I said: 'Well, Cavalier, does everything go to please you?' He muttered:

"'Yes and no. There is something I do not like.'

"I asked, 'What is it, my good fellow?' He shook his head.

"'Not yet, sir. I don't want to trouble you till it is necessary.'

"I insisted, but he absolutely refused to enlighten me before dinner. I understood it must be a serious affair. Thinking of nothing else to say, I remarked:

"'Is there plenty of game?'

"'Oh,' he replied, 'the game is plenty. You will find all you wish. Thank heaven! I can keep your eye on that.'

"He said this with so much gravity, so much grief, it was nearly comical. His heavy grey moustache drooped mournfully over his lips.

"Suddenly I bethought myself I had not yet seen his nephew. 'Where is Marius? Why does he not show himself?' The guard jumped and looked me suddenly in the face.

"'Well, monsieur, I had rather tell you that after a while; yes, I had rather. It is on his account I am worried.'

"'Ah. Well, where is he?'

"'He is in the stable, sir. I am waiting for him to come.'

"'What has he done?'

"'This is the story, sir.'

"And the old man hesitated, his voice changed, trembled. His face became wrinkled all at once with the lines of old age. He spoke slowly:

"'Well, I have seen this winter traces of poachers in the Rosary Woods, but have not been able to catch anyone. I passed night after night there, sir, to no effect. Then they began to lay snares in the woods in Ecorcheville. I had grown thin with watching; but when it came to taking the marauders, it was impossible. You would have said they foresaw my intentions, my plans.

"'But one day, as I brushed Marius' coat, his Sunday coat, I found four sous in his pockets. Where had the boy got them?

"'I thought about it for eight days, and I found he went out—he went out just as I went to bed. Yes, monsieur.

"'Then I watched him, but without his suspecting it—oh, yes, without that. And one night I went to bed before he went out; then I followed him. He could not follow as noiselessly as I, monsieur. And there I came upon him, yes, Marius, setting traps on your ground, sir—he, my nephew, I, your keeper.

"'My blood rushed to my head, and I nearly killed him on the spot, I beat him so. Yes, I beat him, and I promised him that when you came I should correct him with my own hands in your presence. This is why I have nearly perished with sorrow. He has neither father nor mother, this boy, he has no relatives but me. I have kept him, I could not cast him off, could I?

"'But if he should do so again, there is an end of it, an end of pity. Have I done right, sir?'

"I held out my hand. 'You have done well, Cavalier; you are a brave man.'

"He rose.

"'Thank you, sir. Now I will go to fetch him. He needs punishment.'

"I knew it would be useless to try to dissuade the old man. I let him follow out his own humour. He went to seek the

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rascal, and led him in by the ear. I was seated upon a straw chair, with the grave face of a judge. Marius had grown and seemed uglier to me than ever, with his shy, sullen manner. His uncle pushed him before me, with his military air.

"'Ask pardon of the landlord.'

"The boy would not utter a word. Then the old gentleman seized him under the arms, and, throwing him to the ground, began to flog him so violently that I rose to interfere. The child howled: 'Pardon! pardon! pardon! I promise!'

"Cavalier raised him from the ground, and, forcing him to his knees before me, said: 'Ask pardon.' The rascal murmured with lowered eyes:

"'I ask pardon.'

"Then his uncle dealt him a parting slap that sent him flying. He ran out, and I saw him no more that evening. Cavalier came back trembling.

"'He has a bad nature,' he said; and during dinner he repeated:

"'Oh, I am so sorry, sir; you don't know how sorry I am.'

"I tried to console him, but in vain. I went to bed early, that I might start hunting in time. My dog was sleeping on the floor at the foot of my bed when I extinguished my candle. I was awakened in the middle of the night by Bock's furious barking, and I saw instantly that my room was full of smoke. I sprang from my bed, lighted my candle, ran to the door and opened it. A whirlwind of flame entered. The house was on fire! I closed the heavy oak door quickly, and, putting on my coat, let my dog out of the window by means of a rope formed by my bed-clothes. Then, throwing my garments out, followed by my game-bag and gun, I escaped in the same manner. I cried at the top of my voice:

"'Cavalier! Cavalier!' But the keeper did not awake. He slept the heavy sleep of an old gendarme. Through the windows I saw the lower part of the house was a fiery furnace, and I saw that it had been filled with straw to favour the flames. Who could have set it on fire? I commenced to call furiously—

"'Cavalier!' Then the thought occurred to me that he was suffocated with the smoke.

"I had an inspiration, and slipping a cartridge in my gun, I fired a shot through his window. The six panes of glass fell inside in fragments. This time the old man heard, and he appeared in his shirt, dazed by the light that blazed before his house. I cried: 'Your house is on fire! Jump out of the window, quick!' The flames burst out of the door and window and threatened to swallow him. He sprang out and alighted on his feet like a cat, and just in time. The thatched roof broke in the middle and the stairway made a draught for the fire that roared below. An immense red sheaf of flame rose in the air. It spread out like a column of water and scattered a shower of sparks all round the cottage, and in a few moments there was nothing but a mass of flames. Cavalier asked in a fright:

"'How did it happen?'

"I replied: 'They set fire in the kitchen.' He muttered:

"'Who could have done it?'

"And I cried out instinctively, 'Marius!'

"The old man understood. He faltered: 'Oh, Mother of God! Was it for that he did not come in?'

"Then a horrible thought struck me. I cried, 'Céleste, Céleste!'

"He said nothing, but the house lay crumbling before us, nothing now but a fiery furnace—brilliant, dazzling, bloody, a formidable funeral pile, where the poor woman now lay nothing but a charred mass.

"The fire reached the neighbouring shed. I thought of my horse, and Cavalier ran to let him out. He had hardly opened the stable door before a rapid, nimble body rushed out, passing between his legs and knocking him on his face. It was Marius fleeing with all his strength. The old man was up in a moment. He wanted to run and catch the miserable wretch, but, knowing he could not, he was seized with an irresistible fury, and, yielding to one of those sudden, irrational impulses, that no one can foresee or hinder, he took my gun that lay near him, shouldered it, and before I could prevent he fired, without knowing whether or not it was loaded. One barrel was not discharged when I fired through the window, and the charge struck the flying boy in the back, and he fell on his face covered with blood. He pawed the earth with his hands and knees like a wounded animal that seeks to escape. I raised him up. He was already dying. He expired without saying a word. Cavalier, still in his shirt, his limbs bare, stood near us, stupefied, motionless. When the people came from the village they carried my keeper away.

"I appeared as witness at the trial and I related the facts, concealing nothing. Cavalier was acquitted. But he disappeared the next day, leaving the country. I never saw him again.

"This, gentlemen, is my hunting story."

MY HINDOO SERVANT.

My servant, Sajad, was by no means an extraordinary fellow. I picked him up in Benares, one scorching afternoon in midsummer. I was in want of a *kitmutgar*, and he seemed to have nothing to do. He could not speak one word of English, and, to tell the truth, that was the first and only recommendation upon which I engaged him.

In religion he was a Mussulman, but he was far from being devout; indeed, I very soon rated him as rather below the average in everything. However, as I did not require anything remarkable, we got on well enough to the end; for he followed me—poor fellow—to his death.

Steal? Most decidedly. He would invariably steal anything belonging to me that attracted his fancy. If I discovered it and went to work in the right way, I could usually get it back.

Sajad never left me for an hour from the time he entered my service. He followed me all day, and slept on a rug at my door or lay on the sand at my feet or just outside my tent, at night, as the case might be, and he received just as many lectures on veracity and made just as many promises as the time allowed; but I am sure that he told me just as many lies the last week of his life as he did in the first week he was with me. It is as much the nature of the Oriental to lie and steal, as it is of a dog to bark at a horse, or of a cat to help herself to cream.

One who expects too much is apt to give credit for too little. That may be the reason the Hindoo has such a bad reputation in the minds of some who mean to be just, or even generous. Many a good turn Sajad did me, right in the line of those two straits. It takes a rogue to catch a rogue, and I know that he saved me from being robbed by others many times over for all that he took himself, while he would detect a lie in what any one else told me as naturally as a duck would take to water.

We were marching through the Terai once with a small detachment. A soldier was leading my horse, while I walked upon one side of the path, followed at a little distance by Sajad, hunting for a bird I had shot and which had fallen in the tall grass. Suddenly there was a cry from those behind. I looked quickly over my shoulder.

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A hooded cobra, disturbed by the commotion I was making, had risen out of the grass just behind me. His flat head and flaring hood were already thrown back for a final fling at me. His half-open mouth was within three feet of my face when my eyes rested upon it. If I turned, I should only expose more of my face. If I lifted a hand, he would strike it quicker than lightning. There was no chance to get away, and I was utterly helpless.

Before I had time to think a second thought, however, Sajad made one leap from where he was standing, and before his feet had touched the ground he had brought his staff with a sharp whirr, as it cut the air, too quick even for a snake to dodge, and the next instant the cobra's body was writhing in the grass, while his head, completely severed, fell at my feet.

Had Sajad waited an instant he would have been too late. No one else could have reached me; yet if he had missed his aim, or the snake had dodged, his own life would have paid the forfeit. No one knew it better than Sajad himself, but he took the chance and saved my life. He had in his girdle at the time a bright-coloured silk handkerchief which he had stolen from me, and only that morning had solemnly declared that he knew nothing about it.

Up in the hills, one afternoon, I was lying on a low tent-bed taking a nap, when Sajad saw a poisonous insect, a kind of scorpion, crawling over my pillow. He had nothing near to use as a weapon, and no time to lose. He caught it in his naked hand, and threw it out of the tent-door. I woke in time to see it flying through the air, and, hurrying out, killed it before it got away.

I called to Sajad to ask if he had escaped a sting, and, receiving a cheerful reply in the affirmative, thought no more about it till, chancing to enter the tent softly and unexpectedly, I found him sucking the back of his right hand for dear life. He stopped the instant he saw me, and put the hand behind him.

The poison had already begun to take effect. The hand and arm were swelling, and before long Sajad was lying on the floor, writhing in agony. The only antidotes I had were ammonia and whiskey. Sajad knew the contents of both bottles, for he had the care of all my traps. I did my best for him with the ammonia; but utterly in vain I pleaded, begged, commanded that he take the whiskey. He would not touch it.

Why? Only because he was a Mussulman. No matter how intense his agony or determined my command, he put his left hand over his mouth and shook his head. He felt sure that he was dying, and he believed my assertion that the whiskey might save him, but that made no difference. He came so near death that he was past seeing anything and beyond hearing. He lay upon the ground, just breathing, panting, as though he was almost at the end. It seemed useless to try again, and yet, now that he was unconscious, I could at least make a last, desperate trial with the whiskey. The moment that it touched his lips, he struggled away, clutched his lips with his hand and shook his head.

I believe the very fear that I should succeed in giving him whiskey kept him alive till the poison began to lose its power. At all events, he did not die.

Sajad was as fond of hunting as I. Many a time we two slipped away from camp in the grey of early morning. Once, just before daylight, I was out with my shot-gun in a thinly-wooded jungle, a mile from camp, upon the shore of a small lake, waiting for birds.

It was just my luck. Because I came prepared for birds, there was not one in sight, but three beautiful antelopes came down to drink, within a hundred feet of us. I looked at the shot-gun in disgust; then looked again at the antelope. It was exasperating. I was determined to have a shot, at any rate, and, in the hope that I might stun one of them or at least bewilder him for an instant, I whispered to Sajad to be ready with his knife and make a dash the moment I fired.

Cautiously I raised the gun to my shoulder and was pressing the trigger, when Sajad touched me and whispered: "Wait, Sahib! Look there!"

I looked and my shot-gun fell. At a slight angle, but little more than half-way between us and the antelopes, there crouched a royal Bengal tiger. A single glance was sufficient. He was surely a man-eater. Evidently he had been on the point of satisfying his hunger with an antelope when he caught sight of us. He was within an easy leap of the antelope, but was deliberately turning away and facing us. The motion startled the deer and they bounded off, but the tiger paid them no further attention. The huge creature opened his great jaws till his head seemed nothing but a red, yawning gullet, bordered by long, ragged, glistening teeth, and, with a savage snarl, he began to approach us.

There was no need of looking about for a place of safety. The jungle was sparsely wooded at the best, and the largest tree we had passed in coming from camp would not have borne even Sajad's weight ten feet from the ground. Sajad had only his hunting knife; I nothing but my shot-gun.

"One of us must go, Sahib," Sajad muttered, without taking his eyes from the tiger. "If we run together, we shall both go; he will overtake us in a moment. Let Allah decide as it is written in our foreheads. Run that way, for your life, Sahib. I will run this way. Be quick! before he comes nearer!"

There was no time for thought. It seemed a fair proposition, and even as he spoke the Hindoo started at the top of his speed away. It was useless standing still or following him, and, acting upon his suggestion, I started in the opposite direction.

After running a rod or two, I looked over my shoulder. The tiger had made a leap and was just landing, already crouched for another spring. He was following me!

I will not admit that I hoped he would follow Sajad, but I did hope that he would not choose me. It amounted to the same thing.

I started on one more desperate struggle. I was doomed. I knew it perfectly well; yet while there is life there is hope, and I ran as I never ran before. I resolved to go as far as I could, and then whirl about and give the tiger a charge of fine shot full in the face. It might put out his eyes. There was at least that possibility to hang a desperate hope upon, and throwing my gun to my shoulder, I turned. The tiger was not there!

Looking farther back, I saw his tawny hide in the underbrush. Instantly it rose. He was making a leap, but it was not towards me! One thrill of gratitude shot through my veins, when my heart stood still with horror! There was one sharp yelp as the huge form swept through the air, and, crushing the leaves and branches as it fell, landed upon the prostrate form of Sajad, silently waiting for the blow.

I stood there petrified, the cold perspiration dripping from my forehead. There was not a sound from Sajad. There was only one fierce howl from the tiger. Then all was still.

It was only an instant, but in that instant we two, my Hindoo servant and I, stood out before me in very bold relief. I had run for my life, knowing that the chances lay between us two, and hoping, at least, that the tiger might not follow me. He had run, too, knowing that the chance lay between us, and because the tiger did not follow him he had come back again and tempted him—called him away from me, and given his life for mine.

He was a poor benighted heathen, and only an average sample of his kind. He could not help stealing pretty things. He could not help telling lies. But surely he was a truer, braver, nobler man than I, and if the image of God can be found, to-day, in any of His creatures, it would require no very deep theologian to decide which of us two betrayed it—least profaned.

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THE MYTH OF A MANIAC

FOR two weeks the *Plunging Petrel*, a big three-masted schooner, had ploughed its way through the placid waters of the Pacific with a sameness that was exasperating. Since leaving port, nothing—not even a threatened storm or a lively gale—had broken the monotony.

The ship was bound for Rio, Brazil, with a cargo of wheat, and I was her only passenger—seeking health in this manner, according to my physician's urgent request. She was commanded by a sturdy old navigator, Captain Collins, a man who on first acquaintance might appear to be cold, distant, and reserved, but who proved, in my case at least, to be exactly the opposite, for I soon found him a genial, hearty, good fellow. He was strict with his men, but not tyrannical, and he was a good story-teller.

But monotony was not to last us all through the voyage. There was soon a singular and ominous change.

One day, about noon, at the beginning of the third week, a sailor named Bates was placed in irons for striking a messmate with a marlinspike and breaking his arm. The punishment was undoubtedly deserved, but there were angry mutterings, and more than one sullen face among the crew in consequence, for Bates, whose only fault was an uncontrollable temper, was a general favourite. But when the unfortunate man was found dead the next morning things began to look black for the officers.

There was no sign of wound or struggle upon the body of the dead man, but the atmosphere of the forecastle where he had been confined was redolent with the fumes of chloroform. I called the captain's attention to this, but he thought I must be mistaken, and would not be convinced, even when the boatswain and one of the mates argued on my side. He declared that there was none of the drug on board, and never had been. And so it happened that poor Bates was buried in the deep sea, at the very hour at which he was to have been liberated.

At eight bells the following night, when the first-mate went on deck to relieve his fellow-officer, the latter had disappeared, and could not be found. I happened to be leaning against the mizzen-mast, smoking, when the alarm was given, and I could have sworn that I had been smelling chloroform for half-an-hour, although I did not call the fact to mind until the dreadful cry of "Man overboard!" was sounded and all hands piped on deck. A boat containing the first mate and four men was lowered at once, the ship was brought about, and two hours were spent in fruitless search. In the meantime every accessible nook in the ship, which was tacking backwards and forwards in the locality, was inspected with like results. At last the searching party was taken on board, and the ship resumed its course.

The captain now took turns at the watch with the mate, and everything ran smoothly till the following night, or rather the next morning—four bells of the first watch. Then, when he turned out to relieve the mate, that officer could not be found. The same efforts were made to find the missing man, and with the same result as on the previous night, and the captain was nearly frantic. He was not only deeply grieved at the death of his two officers, but greatly shocked and mystified at the strange manner of their disappearance.

On both occasions the water, apart from a heavy swell, was comparatively smooth, the wind only brisk enough to fill the sails, and the stars were shining. This, together with the fact that both the mates were known to be expert swimmers, so that they should, under ordinary circumstances, have been able to keep afloat for hours, deepened the mystery. The captain would not admit that the presence of chloroform, if it existed at all, had anything to do with the mystery.

On the afternoon following the second disappearance the captain called me into his cabin, shut and locked the door, and beckoned me to a chair at a small table. I saw nothing remarkable about this, believing that he only wished to talk over his troubles; but when he took a seat opposite me I noted that his face was deathly pale, and that his lips were tightly compressed.

"My two officers have been murdered, Mr. Vincent," he fairly gasped.

"Murdered!" I exclaimed. "I have suspected foul play from the first. Have you any evidence?"

"The best in the world. You have noticed the big Dane, Qvistgard?"

"That mild-looking fellow with the red beard?"

"Yes."

"Why, certainly; but you don't suspect him, I hope."

"Of course not. On the contrary, there is mutiny on foot, and he——. But here is a note he slipped into my hand a moment ago. Read it for yourself. Unless you and I and this faithful fellow can outfight or outwit fifteen villains we are doomed."

With a face that must have been as white as the face before me, and a hand that was anything but steady, I picked up a sheet of paper which the captain had thrown on the table, and read the following:—

"CAPTAIN,—I have discovered a horrible plot. All the crew except myself have mutinied. The mates were knocked on the head and thrown overboard. You will share the same fate when you come on deck to relieve the watch to-night, unless you heed this warning. Meet me ten minutes before the close of the second dog-watch, just aft the main hatchway, and I will tell you everything. In the meantime, do not speak to me or send for me, for we are closely watched. I am supposed to side with the crew. The least mistake would be fatal. Don't tell the passenger. He may be all right, but I doubt it. For God's sake, captain, *don't go near the rail.*"

"Don't tell the passenger!" I muttered, as I looked at the captain, not only horror-stricken at the contents of the note, but surprised and hurt at the uncomplimentary reference to myself. But the captain, who must have divined my thoughts, relieved my mind on this point by saying:

"That's all right, my dear Vincent. The fellow is only a trifle over-cautious. Don't mind him. I would trust you with the ship, and my life too, for that matter. You see I have shown my confidence by allowing you to read the note. Now, I want your advice. Your assistance I shall count on without the asking when the time comes."

"Thank you, captain," I answered. "To start with, I should certainly not go on deck till it is time to meet the Dane, if I were you."

My companion had now regained his composure to a certain extent, and sat for a moment drumming the table with his fingers.

"Who has the watch now?" I continued presently.

"Hutton, the tall seaman with the red scar on the back of his hand," was the answer. "He is acting as first mate, and I had decided to give Jones, the little Welshman, the position of second to-morrow. Both are fairly good seamen, and, by all the gods, I can't understand it! I could have sworn that these two men were as true as the dead mates ever were, until I got this warning from Qvistgard. But he is right, my boy, he is right. All this comes from that unfortunate Bates affair. I wonder who is the leader? If he could be shot or placed in irons it might quell the others. Have you a pistol?"

"A small pocket affair," I answered.

"I have two large ones, and a repeating rifle in my chest," continued the captain. "How would it do to batten down

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the hatchway of the forecastle when part of the dogs are below at supper, and pump lead into the rest of them? I don't believe they are armed, unless they have a few knives. We could then make for the nearest port."

"Better wait till you see the Dane," I replied. "He may be able to give you the name of the leader."

For an hour or more we continued to plan, but without being able to decide on anything definite. At last it was agreed that I should go on deck, and see what could be learned there. In half an hour I returned, with anything but favourable news. The men were talking guardedly in groups, and when I passed near them they quickly dispersed. The big Dane was leaning over the rail near the log, silent, and apparently watching with absorbed attention the receding, foam-capped waves in the ship's wake.

Before sundown all our weapons had been oiled, examined, and loaded, the captain and myself secreting the revolvers about our persons, and leaving the rifle for the Dane.

The sky had clouded over late in the afternoon, and night, gloomy and foreboding, settled down on the schooner.

"The very elements seem to be in sympathy with this cursed business," said the captain, when it began to grow so dark in the cabin that we could hardly make out each other's faces; "and I feel as if the jig was about up with me."

As soon as the last streak of day had disappeared, the captain, revolver in hand, mounted the companion-ladder, and stole softly on deck. I followed him part of the way, but stopped, according to his directions, and stood with my head and shoulders above the companion-way, ready, in case of an emergency, to lend any assistance that might lie in my power.

I never looked into a blacker night. The air was soft and warm, and fitful gusts of wind dashed a few cooling rain-drops against my face, as I held my revolver and tried to keep the receding form of the captain in view. But he disappeared almost instantly, and, owing to the whistle of the wind in the rigging, the groaning of the masts and the creaking of the yard-arms, I could not hear his footsteps after he had gone half-a-dozen paces. He carried no lantern, but several lights glimmered fore and aft, dancing and shifting unsteadily about, like veritable will-o'-the-wisps. None, however, were near the main hatchway, the place of meeting.

Anxiously I waited five, ten, fifteen minutes, as nearly as I could reckon time, but neither sight nor sound brought intelligence of the captain. At last I could bear the suspense no longer, and I began to walk slowly along towards the bow.

When I thought I had reached the location of the hatchway, and was on the point of coming to a halt, I struck my foot against something and fell—the planks of the deck seeming to open and engulf me.

While still descending through space I realised what had happened—the hatchway had been opened, and I had fallen into the hole. A second later I found myself lying between two bags of wheat, more frightened than hurt, and with the fumes of chloroform almost suffocating me. Before trying to rise, I discovered that I was not in total darkness, and that a dim light came from somewhere, but not from above, I was sure. Presently a muffled groan reached me from the direction of the stern, and on looking over my shoulder I saw the stooping form of a man outlined by the rays of a lantern in front of him, about twenty feet away.

I gained my feet with some difficulty, and was about to step forward when the ship gave a lurch, and I was thrown lengthwise against the hull. Before I could stand up again, the bent form assumed an upright posture, and I recognised the big Dane. Muttering incoherently, he picked up the lantern, and started towards the place where I had first fallen, off to my left.

Whether it was fear, the shock caused by striking the hull, or the effects of the chloroform that kept me from trying to get up, I am not prepared to say, but I did not attempt to move hand or foot.

As the light drew near, I discovered a rope dangling from the deck. When the Dane drew near this rope, he deposited his lantern beside him, rubbed his big, hard hands together with a loud, rasping noise, and laughed a low, fiendish sort of chuckle, which fairly chilled my blood. A moment later, his merriment subsided, and, taking hold of the rope with one hand, he picked up the lantern with the other. I expected to see him run his arm through the handle of the lantern, and go, hand over hand, through the hatchway, but he was in no hurry, and began to talk in a harsh undertone:

"So far so good, King Qvistgard," he said. "A million pounds of diamonds, sewed up in sacks of silk, and all my own. Oh, what a royal present for my ebony princess! Fifteen days more and I shall reign supreme. The two mates and the captain are now my royal subjects, and to-morrow night the passenger will join them. Then come me hearties Hutton and the little Welshman; and so down the list. Ha! ha! ha! ha!"

Never until that awful moment had I heard the blood-curdling laugh of a maniac, but I recognised it as quickly as if I had passed all my days inside the walls of a madhouse. Before I knew it, my strength, or courage, or both, suddenly returned, and I arose cautiously to my feet, discovering, at the same time, the revolver, which had fallen from my hand when I stumbled on the deck. It was lying almost at the feet of the Dane. Advancing cautiously, I stooped, and was about to pick up the weapon; but before I could get hold of it the ship lurched again, I collided with the madman, and we both went down together.

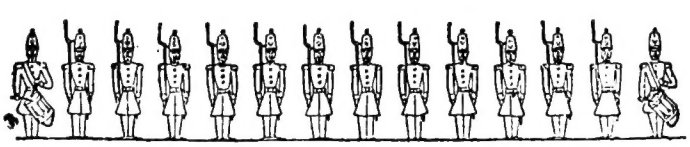
The revolver escaped me, the light in the lantern was extinguished, and there was a scream, a piercing cry of fright and anguish, such as only a terror-stricken madman can utter. And then, with that awful shriek ringing in my ears and the strong fingers of the demented Dane clutching my throat, I became insensible.

When consciousness returned I was lying in my berth; it was daylight, and Hutton was standing beside me. As soon as I was able to talk, he told me that just after dark, on the previous evening, a horrible cry was heard coming from the direction of the main hatchway, and that when the little Welshman and several other sailors rushed to the spot, the raving Dane was seen to climb up a rope from the hold. As soon as he gained the deck, he ran screaming to the rail and threw himself into the sea. I was found, more dead than alive, and taken to my cabin.

Soon after the captain and the two mates were discovered, gagged and bound near the spot where I had first seen the Dane. The captain recovered from the effects of the chloroform which had been administered to him, and was removed with the two officers, who were still alive, but too weak and exhausted to stand on their feet for many hours.

In two days all had recovered, and the *Flying Petrel* was manned and officered as before, save for the absence of Bates and the big Dane. All went well to the end of the voyage.

The mutiny was only a myth in the mind of the madman.



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THE OUTLAWS' TREASURE.

Illustrated by MR. A. KEMP TEBBY.

SUMMARY.

The mail train has been robbed between Cornwall and La Grange stations, and £20,000 worth of gold stolen by a gang of desperadoes, headed by two brothers named Mulligan.

CHAPTER III.

THE SWAMP RETREAT.

THE robbers had worked without fear upon the train. Fully armed, and desperate as they were, they would not have hesitated a moment had it been crowded with men. They showed their courage when their leader, with two men, went on board at one of the previous stations, and remained, knowing to a certainty that the engine would be thrown from the rails, with the likelihood of dragging the whole train after it, and killing and maiming those within.

In the settlement of new countries, where the influx of the population is rapid, there is always sure to be an abnormal development of crime. The most desperate and abandoned are always drawn thither by the laxity of the legal power, and the abundant opportunity given for the commission of crime.

As an almost inevitable consequence, these men become emboldened by their immunity from arrest and punishment, and overstep the mark of prudence, until the community is aroused in self-defence, a vigilance committee is formed, and short and decisive work is the result.

The Mulligan brothers were two desperadoes, who, it was said, came originally from Texas, where, on account of their numerous crimes, they were compelled to flee the State; and when a man leaves that section of the Union for his misdemeanours, he may safely be set down as a phenomenon of villainy.

Gathering round them half-a-dozen men as desperate as themselves, they settled in one of the Western States, where they soon distinguished themselves for their disregard of all laws, both human and divine. They were engaged in bar-room brawls, in fights in the streets, murders and assassinations, until they became a perfect terror in the neighbourhood.

With the breaking out of the civil war between North and South they disappeared, and it was sincerely hoped that they would be killed in that terrible conflict; but the whole eight—after running no little personal risk—reappeared in the neighbourhood which they had left before, and renewed their outrages upon the community.

Glided away through the woods.

The authorities offered large rewards for their apprehension, and one or two men were rash enough to attempt to decoy some of them in the meshes of the law; but they failed, and were repaid by being shot down like dogs.

For convenience simply the outlaws settled in the central part of a vast marshy tract, which has been referred to elsewhere, where they made their home, and roamed over the country as they saw fit.

They had little or no fear of arrest in the community as it was organised at this time. Both Jim and Dick had openly jeered at the hand-bills which had posted them as outlaws, and emptied their revolvers after the officers of the law who had gone to the trouble of nailing up the notice.

But it was convenient for them to have a secure place of retreat, and they had chosen it well.

The form of an immense negro rose from the corner.

After the robbery they glided away through the woods like phantoms of the night. None of them had horses with them, and they stole as noiselessly and swiftly through the dark arches of the forest as so many Sioux Indians upon the trail of a foe.

They had gone but a few hundred yards when they reached the margin of Devil's Creek, at a place where it was about a hundred yards in width, and of considerable depth. There a long, narrow boat was awaiting them, and in an instant they were all within and seated. Two of them took up the oars, and the vessel progressed rapidly through the inky darkness, where it was impossible to see a foot in advance, and where their own presence was betrayed by the burning tips of their cigars.

Yet they were so well acquainted with the route that they advanced without hesitation through the blank gloom.

They laughed and chuckled over their success, and determined to indulge in a good spree for the unexpected good fortune that had attended their attempt.

A half mile up this stream, and they turned into a narrow tributary, which was ascended to about the same distance, when the stream broadened out into a sort of lake, in the centre of which was a small wooded island. Here their journey was at an end, and here they landed.

Passing about among the trees, they reached a sort of rude cabin, which had been erected years before, and which was large enough to contain them without crowding each other.

A light, burning dimly, was seen through the open window, and showed that someone was within, and Dick Mulligan, the moment he entered the door, shouted:

"Jubal! I say, Jubal!"

He waited a moment, but there was no response.

"Jubal! Confound your black hide, where are you?"

"Hello, dar!" came the response, in a voice so thick and obscured as to show that the individual was not yet fairly awake.

"Why don't you stir yourself when you know we are about? Come, you black dog, and 'tend to things!"

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The form of an immense negro, somewhat bowed with age, arose from the corner, where he had slumbered upon the ground, stumbled forward, and threw additional fuel upon the fire, which, blazing up, displayed an apartment some twenty feet square, with a ladder communicating with the storey above.

A rough deal table was at one end of the room, while nearly a dozen chairs were scattered promiscuously about. In one corner was the rudest sort of cupboard, where a few dishes and cooking utensils were kept for the use of the negro, who prepared their meals, and acted as general servant to them all.

There was no stove in the room, a broad deep-throated fireplace answering for every such necessity.

The men were in high spirits to-night. They had captured over £20,000 in gold, to say nothing of the valuable jewellery, and there was an inclination upon the part of all to celebrate it in a manner that they judged befitting the occasion.

A huge demijohn of whiskey was brought forward by the African, and, with a number of tumblers, placed upon the table.

Then the carousal began. Drink after drink was swallowed until these men, who were hardened to such excesses, began to reel in their seats, and some fell to the floor.

The carousal began

Maudlin snatches of song, jests, and meaningless remarks were muttered and mumbled, until the eight men, who, a few hours before, cowed and held a whole train in subjection, and who, at that moment, were the terror of the neighbourhood for miles, were as helpless as so many invalid children.

Had a few police appeared on the scene at this juncture, or even had Fred Weldon stalked among them alone and unattended, short work could have been made with the desperadoes.

The negro was the only sober man in the party. When he saw all the others stretched helpless upon the floor, he carefully covered them with their overcoats and blankets, and then passed outside.

The night was dark, but during the last hour a faint moon had risen over the tree-tops, and there was the faintest illumination of the lake which inclosed the island where these desperate men had their homes.

"Dem yar fellers ar ob no 'count till to-morrow," he soliloquised, as he stood meditatively looking out upon the dark, silent water. "Dey's sometimes pretty ugly when dey're comin' out dar tantrums, and de best ting dis chile can do is to keep skearce."

He had been the slave of the Mulligan brothers in years gone by, and he had remained faithful by them, through all their adventures and villainies, up to the present moment, and, coward as he was, he was ready to risk his life for them at any moment.

"De night ain't bery cool, and p'raps I'd better stay out yah—sh! What dat?

A tremour of terror shook his frame as he heard the faint ripple of water near the other shore. Stooping down, he peered long and anxiously in the direction of the alarming sound, but he could discern nothing.

"It must have bin a fish——"

He paused abruptly, for at that moment he distinctly saw a small Indian canoe gliding noiselessly along the bank, propelled by a single man.

CHAPTER IV.

The Night Alarm.

When the express train halted at the La Grange station, and the score or two of passengers that had been waiting there stepped into it, the corpulent gentleman, who had given his name as Smith, walked down the Pullman, with valise in hand, and took his seat beside young Fred Weldon, of whom mention has already been made.

The first-mentioned personage, as we have intimated, was a noted detective, whose real name was Squirrek, and who had been engaged in some of the most famous cases of recent years.

The detective, as he now appeared in his spectacles, white cravat, his clerical suit of black, and the innocent questioning stare of his big blue eyes, had a certain Pickwickian look about him that would have induced a stranger to set him down as one of the most credulous and harmless of his kind.

Before taking his seat beside Fred Weldon, he inquired with great concern, whether the place was engaged, and being told that it was not, he sank down as gingerly as though he were doing a forbidden act.

As he did so he gave one sharp, sidelong glance at the handsome young man—a glance which told him as much as an hour's fixed stare would have done—and then, with the air of a nervous gentleman who wasn't often from home, made inquiries regarding the robbery, which was just then the subject of discussion through the entire train.

Fred answered his questions with a succinct courtesy that soon left little to be told. But when he had finished, and supposed the matter done, his portly companion appeared to consider the matter only just opened.

The innocent-looking man at his side plied him so skilfully that in the space of a few minutes he had extracted everything that the young man knew or had ever heard of the noted Mulligan brothers.

After this came a moment's silence, and then it was pleasantly broken by the portly gentleman, who next succeeded in winning from the young lawyer almost as much of his own personal history as he knew himself. It was done, too, in such a quiet insinuating manner that Fred could take no offence.

By the time the express began slacking up at the station of Somerville, a town of about two thousand inhabitants, where

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He gave one sharp, sidelong glance.

the engine generally took in water, Fred Weldon began putting on his overcoat.

"Do you get out here?" inquired his new friend.

"Yes; this is where my mother lives. I am making her a short visit. You don't live here?"

"No, but I have to remain here a while—perhaps a week or so. I shall put up at the 'Drover's,' and if you have a spare evening, or an hour or so through the day on your hands, I shall be glad to see you."

Fred promised to continue their acquaintance, and, after bidding Mr. Smith good-night, the two separated, and took different directions; while the detective made his way to a hotel, the young man walked briskly down one of the bye streets, turning in at a small residence, which he entered with the manner of one who was perfectly at home.

So he was, for here lived his mother, the only relative he had in the world, and whose almost idolising affection he returned with an equally strong love.

A moment later, a handsome woman in middle life was clasped in his arms, and the son sat down to a meal which had been spread for him, and which had been waiting for the two hours that the express was behind time.

Fred explained that a slight detention, a sort of break-down, had delayed the train, but that none of the passengers had been hurt, and he was sorry that his mother had felt any uneasiness regarding him.

Fred Weldon had practised law in Brampton for two years, with a light heart and almost equally light purse. Young, enterprising, ambitious, handsome and talented, he toiled on, encouraged and discouraged, and with profound faith in the good day coming.

It cannot be said that he had nothing in the way of practice, for now and then clients did come to him, but they were not numerous by any means, and he had plenty of leisure for study and physical exercise.

He was the son of a physician, who had died when his child was quite young, leaving him enough to complete his collegiate course, and to afford a bare subsistence to his widow.

Believing there was a favourable opening at Brampton, some forty odd miles distant, Fred had started work there, and there he had toiled and hoped, and there he was toiling and hoping still.

But just now he was home for a short holiday; as he told his mother, he had arranged his business affairs so as to spend a week with her, and he told the truth when he added that he managed to do so with little difficulty to himself.

The chat was pleasant and affectionate, just as might have been expected between a mother and her only son, and at a comparatively early hour Fred withdrew to his room for the night. The next day was passed mainly at home, without seeing his friend Smith, but he was occupied until late in the evening in reading to his mother, and it was near midnight when he retired.

He had scarcely entered his bedroom, when, in the still night, he heard the gate pulled violently open, someone walked rapidly up the gravel path, stepped hurriedly to the door, and gave a ringing knock.

Mrs. Weldon was on the lower floor, and, before her son could anticipate her, she had unfastened the door, and saw before her the scared face of Jacob, one of the men-servants of Judge Woodland.

"Well, Jacob, what is the matter?"

"I am afraid something has gone wrong with the judge."

"What is it!"

"That's what I can't tell. I've come after Master Fred; the folks over at home are going distracted over it, and sent me out in search of some folks to go and hunt the judge up."

"Is he lost?" inquired Fred, who by this time had descended to the hall-door.

"I'm afraid he is. He went off to Millville this morning, and promised to be back by sunset, and he hasn't come yet."

"I don't see any occasion for alarm in that. Something may have happened to detain him."

"But the horse came tearing homeward a little while ago, all covered with froth and foam, with the harness flying about him, and with nothing of the trap at all. The women folk are sure the judge is killed. The old lady is weeping and wringing her hands, and as for Florence, she is about crazy."

"That is indeed serious," replied young Weldon, who had already begun donning his overcoat. "I will go with you; mother, good-night."

A hasty kiss was given and taken, and the two men hurried down the path and out into the road, and then up the street, and out in the country towards the residence of Judge Woodland.

"His horse has probably run away with him," Fred found time to remark as he ran along.

"No, he hasn't either," was the emphatic denial.

"How do you know that?" asked the young man, in considerable surprise.

"'Cause that yer mare never done such a thing with the Judge nor anyone else, and what's more, she wouldn't do it if she had a wild Indian a-driving of her."

"What, then, do you think was the matter?"

Fred repeated the question several times before the old man answered:

"I b'lieve it's them Mulligan brothers!"

"No—"

But the young lawyer paused abruptly as he recalled that Judge Woodland was a well-known opponent to the notorious band. He had managed to get one of them in his clutches, and had sentenced him to twenty years' imprisonment, but on his way he had escaped through the connivance of his guard, who were doubtless influenced by their fear of the desperadoes.

Furthermore, it was Judge Woodland who had been mainly instrumental in inducing such a large reward to be offered for the capture of the gang, having guaranteed one half of it himself.

All this flashed through the mind of Fred Weldon at the moment he had commenced to remonstrate with the declaration of the man, and he withheld further answer. He felt that there was a probability that the truth had been spoken.

"Only bring him back.

Judge Woodland, living but a short distance out of Somerville, probably felt secure against any personal danger from these ruffians, although it is not to be supposed that such a consideration

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would have influenced him in the discharge of his duty.

The headquarters of the outlaws was thirty or forty miles distant. While the two brothers themselves, and one or two others, were known to many of the police, yet the majority of the gang were shrewd enough to keep themselves strangers to those from whom there was any cause to fear danger.

Many of them, including the leaders, went about as they chose, sometimes going as far as Chicago and other large cities; but when they did so they were so thoroughly disguised, that it would have taken a keen-eyed detective to have suspected their identity.

But Judge Woodland was a marked man. He had received numerous warnings during the trial of one of the gang, all of which he treated with contemptuous indifference.

The horse of Fred Weldon suddenly shied.

But as week after week passed away without his seeing any of the gang, his alarmed family forgot their fears; and when, on this pleasant day in autumn, he started for a neighbouring village, there was not a word of warning uttered, and not a thought entered his head as his docile mare jogged along.

A few hundred yards, and Fred Weldon reached the residence. As he anticipated, he found the family in the greatest distress. Mrs. Woodland was wringing her hands, and was on the verge of hysterics, while Florence, more beautiful than ever in her woe, was hurrying back and forth, and doing what she could to assist the party of rescue, or rather of search, in making their preparations.

A hundred men could have been raised in the town, but they were not needed. Jacob had been sent in great haste to gather such as he thought fit, and he had selected three besides Fred Weldon—three strong, sturdy fellows, who had run with all despatch upon receiving the alarming tidings, and who were now mounted, and only awaiting the coming of the fourth man.

"Oh, Mr. Weldon, I am so glad you have come!" exclaimed Florence, as she seized his hand.

"This is, indeed, sad," said Fred; "but I hope it is not so bad as——"

"Oh, hurry—hurry! Only bring him back, and we will pray for you as long as we live."

A few moments later the four men cantered out on the road, and started in search of the missing Judge Woodland.

"He is one of Dick Mulligan's men."

CHAPTER V.

THE WRONG MAN.

IT was beyond midnigh when the four horsemen took the road over which the affrighted mare of Judge Woodland had thundered home, and they spurred their animals to a swinging gallop, their whole minds and energies bent upon the work before them.

There was a full moon high up in the heavens, and they could see for a considerable distance ahead, so that it was hardly possible for them to pass any important object upon the way without seeing it.

The four were armed with revolvers, and every one of them was brave, and anxious to meet the men who had dared to offer any violence to Judge Woodland.

Fred Weldon recognised two of the men as old friends of his—one of them was a middle-aged blacksmith, a man noted for his activity, great strength, and personal prowess. He was remarkably skilful in the use of both the pistol and rifle, having won quite a name as a sharpshooter during the war.

The other was the son of the keeper of the "Drover's Hotel," who was rather dissipated at times, but who was quite an athlete, and had shown such proof of his skill and bravery that there were many disposed to overlook his failings, which at times were of a glaring nature. He was always ready to offer his services in the cause of right, no matter what parties were concerned, and he was the first man to whom Jacob hastened in his extremity.

But the third man was a stranger to Fred Weldon, and for a time he failed to make out who he was; but after they had got fairly upon the road, and he gained a view of his face, he was startled into an exclamation of surprise as he recognised in the large, heavy-set personage no less a character than the innocent-looking Mr. Smith, whom he had encountered in the express train a couple of nights before.

Scarcely a word was spoken among the party until they had ridden some distance, when the detective turned upon Weldon, having noticed his fixed looks for several minutes past.

"You seem surprised to see me among your friends!" he remarked with a smile.

"Indeed I am; you are the last man I should have expected to see engaged in an expedition of this kind."

"I was smoking a quiet cigar with Tom here when the man came after him, and of course I couldn't let my friend go alone, and that's how I am here."

"You are aware," said Fred with some hesitation, "that there may be danger attending this?"

"Yes."

All, excepting Smith, had some theory to offer for the disappearance of Judge Woodland. The detective merely listened to the others, and held his peace.

The hour being so late, they encountered few people on the road. They were now following the turnpike, but after going a couple of miles they turned off into a branch road leading directly towards the village where Judge Woodland had been. During the few minutes that the three men had awaited the arrival of Fred Weldon, they had learned the direction by which the missing man always went to and came from his destination on this day. So there

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was no halting for conjecture as to the proper course to pursue.

"It is on this road that we'll learn something of the judge, if we learn it at all," remarked Tom Haldy, as they turned into it.

"I recollect it very well," replied Fred, "although it is a good many years since I have travelled over it."

"And I've a feeling that the murder has took place nigh to the Ten-Mile Woods," added Jim, the blacksmith, who sent a shudder over every member of the party by the mention of the word *murder*.

The Ten-Mile Woods were scarcely half of that in extent, having borne the name ever since the clearing off of the surrounding country, and they were now several miles ahead of the horseman.

"What sort of a forest is it?" inquired the detective.

"An ordinary tract of woods, extending for nearly five miles on both sides of the road."

"Is it known ever to have been the scene of any tragedy?"

"Not that I can recall——"

"Don't you remember the drover that was shot near the half-way house just before the war?" interrupted Tom.

"You are right—I had forgotten that."

"What was the circumstance?" inquired the detective, who allowed no opportunity to pass for gaining information.

"It is a story that is soon told," replied Haldy. "A drover was found shot near the half-way house, within twenty minutes after the pistol-shot had been fired. Father was riding by just after dark, and he found the poor fellow still alive, and able to describe the man who did it."

"Did he recognise the description?"

"Yes, it was old Balters, who kept the Half-way House, and, to satisfy himself, father stopped at the House, and took a drink and smoke with the old fellow, using his eyes as best he knew all the time. The result of it was that he learnt enough to satisfy himself that the old fellow was the assassin. He was arrested the next day, the crime was proved against him, and Judge Woodland sentenced him to be hanged, and he *was* hanged."

"What is this Half-way House?"

"A little dilapidated building standing near the middle of the woods. I have heard that it was built as a tavern, and old Balters used to keep a barrel of whiskey behind the counter, and generally had a stray bed for any traveller who came along."

"Did he live there alone?"

"No; he had a wife and son. The woman ran away with another man just before Balters committed the crime; and the boy, after vowing vengeance upon Judge Woodland for condemning his father to death, disappeared, and I have never heard of him since."

"Is the Half-way House occupied?"

"Not unless it has been taken quite recently."

Fred Weldon listened to this conversation, for it touched another chord which caused a new shiver of dread to run through him. Somewhere, he could not remember where, he had heard it said that young Balters was a member of the Mulligan gang; and only a night or two before, when the train was being robbed by them, he had noticed a stooping form which recalled this young villain.

By this time they had reached the edge of the Ten-Mile Woods, and the detective was busy plying his questions.

"Have either of you passed over this road recently?"

None of the three had.

"Do you know whether any attempt has ever been made upon Judge Woodland's life?"

"I have heard —— Hello! Yonder is somebody!"

Just as the horseman was entering the woods, they descried another horseman coming out. The latter appeared somewhat anxious to avoid them, but he could not very well do so, and so he put on as bold a face as possible, and rode forward. As he came up, he revealed the fact that he was a negro.

"Good ebenin', sah," he called out, anxious to conciliate the strangers.

"Who are you?"

"I's Pomp, and I works up at Massa Beckett's."

"What called you out so late?"

"I—I doesn't like to tell," faltered the African with a silly laugh.

"If you don't answer me at once I'll shoot you!" said the detective, in the fiercest voice he could assume.

"I's being to see Sally—a handsome young lady dat libes down at Gineral Jones', and dat I tuck——"

"Did you meet anyone on your way here?"

"Nobody at all. But oh, my golly, warn't dis chile skeerd!"

"Where? At what?" inquired the detective, as the four men gathered round him.

"Why, right down yonder!" replied the darkey, looking affrightedly behind him. "Down in dat holler. Oh, it was orful!"

"What was it?"

"I was ridin' long quiet-like, when I heard a groan, and I seed sumfin' lookin' like a man, and my hoss gave such a jump——"

The horsemen heard no more, but were dashing away at full speed through the woods, sure that the dead or dying body of Judge Woodland was close at hand.

Several hundred yards were passed in this manner, and then the horse of Fred Weldon suddenly pricked up his ears and gave a snort of alarm and shied to one side.

All four reined up, and the young lawyer at once dismounted.

"There is something here," he said to his companions. "Just keep an eye on my horse while I take a look round."

"Hush!" exclaimed Tom with a shiver. "I heard something like a groan. There, don't you hear it again?"

Every ear did hear something like the low moaning of a person in distress, and a shiver of apprehension ran through Fred as he walked softly towards the wood, with his eyes and ears alert.

"Do you see anything?" asked the detective.

"There he lies."

A dark form was seen stretched upon the ground by the roadside. The next moment the four men had dismounted, and while one quieted the frightened animals, the others hastened to the assistance of the dying man.

In a moment he was borne out where the moonlight could shine upon him. He was yet alive, but breathing with great difficulty.

"He is not dead!" said the detective.

"Good heavens! this is not Judge Woodland. We have the wrong man!" exclaimed Fred Weldon.

"Who is he?" asked Squirrek, equally puzzled.

"He is one of Dick Mulligan's men!" was the reply of the blacksmith.

(To be continued.)

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The Fountain of Youth

It was on the day of the summer solstice, and the glow of midday lay on the corn-fields. At times a fresh wind swept over from the mountain forest near; then the stalks bent low, and the poppies on the edge of the field scattered their delicate petals. Crickets and grasshoppers chirped in the grain, and from the blackthorn on the roadside the yellow-hammer once in a while let her gentle call be heard.

Through the corn-fields, which extended from the valley to the mountain, walked, in the narrow path, a young woman of slender yet strong figure. She wore the customary plaited skirt, and, for protection against the sun's rays, a red kerchief; on her left arm hung a basket, and in her right hand she carried a stone jug.

As the yellow-hammer in the thorn-hedge became aware of her presence he fluttered to the highest twig and called softly: "Maiden, maiden, how do you flourish?" But the bird was mistaken. The blonde Greta was a young wife, and now was on her way to her husband, who felled wood in the forest above.

When the fair one had reached the border of the forest she stood listening, and soon the strokes of a woodman's axe told her where to turn her steps. It was not long before she saw her husband, who felled a pine-tree with mighty strokes, and, with joyful voice, she called to him.

"Remain standing where thou art," responded he. "The tree will fall directly." And the pine-tree gave a deep sigh, bowed itself, and sank crashing to the earth.

Now Greta came nearer, and the sunburnt woodcutter took his young wife in his arms and kissed her fondly. Then she sat down on the trunk of the tree, and took the food from the basket she had brought. Here Hans laid down the bread, took his axe in his hands, and saying: "I have forgotten something," stepped in the direction of the fallen tree, and cut three crosses in the wood.

"Why dost thou that, Hans?" asked the wife.

"That was done on account of the wood sprites," explained the husband. "The poor creatures have a wicked enemy, who is the wild hunter. Day and night he waylays them and hunts them with his dogs. But if the pursued little women succeed in escaping to such a tree trunk, then the wild huntsman cannot harm them, because of the three crosses."

The young wife's eyes grew large.

"Hast thou ever met a wood sprite?" asked she, curious.

"No. They only rarely let themselves be seen. But to-day is the solstice, when they become visible."

And suddenly he called with a loud voice into the forest: "Wood sprite, appear!"

He had only done this in order to tease his wife; but, on the holy Midsummer-day, one should not jest about such things.

At once a little woman, three feet high, delicate of form and very beautiful of face, stood before the pair. She wore a long white garment, and in her golden hair a spray of mistletoe.

Hans and Greta were very much frightened. They rose hastily from their seats, and Greta made a bow, the best she could do.

"You have called me at a good time," said the wood sprite, and pointed with forefinger to the orb of the sun, that stood almost over her head, "and a good deed"—here the little woman pointed to the marked tree stump—"is the other reason. Gold and silver have I not to give away, but I know of something better. Come with me—it will do you no harm—and take your jug. You will be able to make use of it."

So she spoke and led the way. Hans shouldered his woodman's axe, Greta took up the stone jug, and both followed the little woman. She had a walk like a duck, and Greta plucked her husband's sleeve, pointed to the waddling little woman, and would have whispered something into his ear, but Hans laid his forefinger on her mouth. Nothing hurts a sprite more than to have a person ridicule her gait. They have feet like a duck, and, therefore, they wear long, flowing garments to protect them.

After a short time the three arrived at a clearing. Very old trees stood in a circle round the meadow; out of the grass arose lilies and bluebells, and great butterflies rested thereon, waving their wings to and fro. And Hans, who thought he knew the whole forest, could not remember to have crossed this place.

On the edge of the meadow stood a small house. The walls were covered with the bark of trees, and the roof was shingled with the scales of pine cones, and each scale was fastened down by a rose thorn. Here the wood sprite was at home.

She led her guests behind the house, and pointed to a spring whose water gushed silently from the black earth. Succulent colt's-foot and irises grew on its brink, and over its surface danced green and gold dragon flies.

"That is the fountain of youth," said the wood sprite. "A bath in its waters turns an old man into a boy and an old woman into a girl. But if one drinks the water, then does it ward off old age unto death. Fill your jug and carry it home. But be economical with this precious water; a drop used each Sunday is enough to keep you young. And yet again: As soon as thou, Hans, dost cast thy eye on a strange woman, or thou, Greta, on a strange man, then the water loses its virtue. That mark you. Now fill your jug, and fare you well."

So spoke the wood sprite, refusing the thanks of the lucky couple, and went into the house. Greta filled the jug with the water of youth, and then they hastened home as quickly as they could to their cottage.

Arrived at home, Hans poured the water into a bottle and sealed it with fir resin. "For the present," he remarked, "we do not find the water of youth necessary, and we can economise. The time will come, indeed, when we will need it." And then they placed the bottle in the cupboard where they kept their treasures: a couple of old coins, a chain on which hung a golden penny, and two silver spoons. But Greta took great care that the water lost not its virtue.

And how they did take themselves in hand! When the young forester went by the garden before the house and exchanged a greeting with Greta, as indeed had been his custom, then Greta looked not up from her vegetable bed. And when Hans sat in the evening in "The White Stag," and the pretty Lisi brought him wine, then he made a face like a cat during a storm; and finally he did not go any more to the inn, but remained at home with his wife. Thus the water must certainly retain its magic power.

So there passed for the young couple a year of love and happiness, when to the two came a third. In the cradle a chubby boy kicked and cried, so that the father's heart leapt for joy. "Now," thought he, "is the time for us to open the bottle. What thinkest thou, Greta? A drop of the water of youth would do thee good."

The wife agreed to the proposition, and Hans went into the room where the magic potion was preserved. With hands trembling with joy he loosened the cork and—Oh, woe, woe!—the bottle slipped from his hands, and the water of youth poured over the floor. He came near falling to the floor, he was so frightened over the misfortune. What was he to do now? His wife must on no account learn what had happened; she might die from fright.

Perhaps he could tell her later what he had done; perhaps, also, he might find the fountain of youth again (which he had

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certainly sought in vain), and he might replace the loss. He hastily filled a new bottle, which was just like the first, with well water; and well water it was also that he gave his wife.

"Ah, how it refreshes and strengthens one!" said Greta; "take a drop also, dear Hans."

And Hans obeyed and praised the virtue of the magic potion, and from that time each one took a drop every Sunday when the church bell was ringing. And Greta bloomed like a rose, and Hans' veins swelled with health and strength. But he postponed the confession of his deed from day to day, for he hoped in his heart to yet find the water of youth; but roam through the forest as he would, he could not discover the meadow where the wood sprite lived.

Thus passed some years. A small maiden joined the little boy, and Frau Greta's once round chin had become double. She herself certainly saw it not, for the mirror was not yet in existence in those days. Hans saw it, indeed, but avoided speaking of it, and redoubled his love for his portly wife.

Then there happened a misfortune. At least Greta held it to be such. As she swept the house one day the small Peter, her eldest, came upon the cupboard in which stood the bottle with the supposed water of youth and clumsily overthrew the bottle, so that it broke and the contents were spilled.

"Oh, thou gracious Heaven!" lamented the mother. "It is lucky, though, that Hans is not at home." With trembling hands she gathered up the fragments from the floor and replaced the bottle by another, which she filled with ordinary water. "Certainly the deception will soon be found out, for now it is all over with the everlasting youth. Alas, alas!" But for the present she did not wish to tell her husband.

Again considerable time passed, and the couple lived together as on the day when the priest had joined their hands in marriage.

Each one carefully avoided letting the other know that youth was past, and each Sunday conscientiously took the magic drop.

Then it happened that one morning a grey hair remained between Hans' fingers as he combed his hair. And he thought: "Now is the time for me to tell the truth to my wife." With a heavy heart, he began: "Greta, it seems to me that our water of youth has lost its strength. Look there! I have found a grey hair. I am getting old."

Greta was frightened, but composed herself, and, forcing a loud laugh, cried, "A grey hair! When I was a little girl, ten years old, I had even then a grey lock amid my hair. The like has frequently happened."

After that, it happened in the autumn, as Hans with his family was eating a Michaelmas goose, that Frau Greta broke a tooth. There was great lamenting, for she was so proud of her white teeth.

And when the couple were alone together, the wife said in an unsteady voice:

"This misfortune would not have occurred if the water——"

But at this Hans blurted out:

"You think the water is good for everything. Has it not often happened before that a child has broken a tooth by cracking a nut? What hast thou against the excellent water? Art thou not fresh and sound as a rose? Or, perhaps, thou hast turned thine eyes upon another that thou mistrustest the virtue of the water?"

Then the wife laughed, wiped the tears from her cheeks, and kissed her husband so that the breath almost left him. But, in the afternoon, when they sat on the stone bench before the house door and sang two-part songs about true love, the passers-by said, "The silly old people!" However, the happy ones heard them not.

So passed many years. The house had become too small for the children. They had gone forth, had married, and had children of their own. The two old people were again alone, and were as dear to each other as on their wedding day; and every Sunday, when the church bells rang, each drank a drop from the flask.

Then once again the day of the summer solstice drew near. On the evening before, Hans and Greta sat before their door and looked towards the heights where the St. John's fire blazed, and from the distance sounded the mirth of the young fellows and maids, who stirred the fire and sprang through its flames in couples.

Then the wife said, "Dear Hans, I would like to go once more to the forest. If thou desirest it also, then will we start early in the morning. But thou must waken me early, for when the elder blossoms the young women like to sleep until the sun is high in the heavens."

Hans agreed. On the next morning he wakened his wife, and they went together into the forest. They walked like lovers, and each gave a careful heed to the steps of the other.

When Hans cautiously jumped over the root of a tree, the wife said, "Ah, Hans, thou leapest indeed like a young kid!" and when Greta timidly stepped over a little ditch, her husband laughed and cried, "Tuck up your dress, Greta! Jump!" And then they selected an old pine-tree, feasting in its shade on what Greta had brought with her.

"It was here," said Hans, "where the wood sprite appeared to us that day, and there yonder must lie the forest meadow with the fountain of youth. But I have never again found the meadow and the spring."

"And, Heaven be thanked! that has mattered not," hastily interrupted Greta. "For our flask is still far from being empty."

"Certainly, certainly," nodded Hans. "But yet it would please me if we could see the good wood sprite once again, and thank her for our good fortune. Come—let us go and seek her. Perhaps I will be as lucky to-day as formerly."

Then they set out and went deeper into the forest, and after a quarter of an hour saw there, before their eyes, the sunny forest meadow. Lilies and bluebells bloomed in the grass, gay-coloured butterflies flew to and fro, and on the edge of the forest stood also the little house, just as in years before. They went towards the house with beating hearts, and, best of all, there was indeed the fountain of youth at hand, and dragon flies, in green and gold, hovered over it.

Hans and Greta stepped to the brim of the spring. They embraced each other and stooped over the water; and from out the clear surface of the spring there confronted them two grey heads, with friendly, wrinkled faces.

Then hot tears fell from the eyes of the old couple, and they stood stammering and sobbing in mutual guilt. It required a long time before it became clear to them that each had deluded and for long years had lovingly deceived the other.

"Thou hast also known that we have both grown old?" cried out Hans joyfully.

"Of course, of course," laughed the wife, amid tears.

"And I, also," rejoiced Hans. Then he took his wife and kissed her as on the day she had said "Yes" to him.

Then the forest sprite suddenly stood before them, as if she had sprung out of the earth.

"Welcome," said she. "You have not appeared before me for a long time. But——but," continued the little woman, and threatened with her finger, "you have kept a bad home with the water of youth. Wrinkles and grey hair! Ah, ah! Now," continued she again, "that is easy to remedy, and you are come at a good hour. Quick! Spring into the fountain of youth; it is not deep; dip your grey heads under; then you shall see a miracle. The bath will restore to you youthful vigour and beauty. But quick, before the sun sinks!"

Hans and Greta looked at each other. "Wilt thou?" asked the husband, in an uncertain voice.

"Never," answered Greta quickly. "Oh, if thou only knowest how happy I am, that at least I may be old! And, also, it would be impossible on account of our children and grandchildren. No, gracious forest sprite, a thousand thanks for your good deed, but we remain as we are. Is it not so, Hans?"

"Yes," nodded Hans, "we remain old. If thou couldst but know, Greta, how well thy grey hair becomes thee."

"As you will," said the wood sprite, a little vexed. "There is no ceremony here." So speaking, she went into the house and locked the door behind her.

But the old couple kissed each other anew. Then they stepped homeward, arm in arm, through the forest, and the midsummer sun shed a golden light upon their grey heads.

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THE FATAL RING

THE Abbé, Dr. Martel, and Besson sat together round the fire at the end of the large room filled with guests. The Abbé was speaking:

"Ah!" said he, "how many inconvenient people do you suppose are every year quietly got rid of by very simple means, which do not even occasion a suspicion in the mind of the family physician, not to mention the coroner, for he never sees the body? Our friend here will tell you that there are several drugs—aconitine, for example, the toxic principle of aconite—the minutest drop of which produces instant death and leaves no trace behind.

"Suppose some one, say, of these correct gentlemen here to-night is in debt and desires the inheritance of his elder brother, who perhaps is epileptic or a paralytic, whose misery it would really be charitable to end. Monsieur, the youngest brother, wears a beautiful ring—which is even more valuable than it looks, for on touching a secret spring the stone slides aside and reveals a minute vial, containing a drop of colourless fluid. This is aconitine, *mes amis*. A portion of it is injected by means of a small hypodermic syringe into the scalp, say, under the hair—*et voilà*; all is over. Martel here arrives, views the body, looks wise, and writes a certificate of death from heart failure! Later, perhaps, the murderer confesses to me, and I keep the secret with him. But you, Monsieur le Prefect, are left out of the affair! You never even heard of the man's death, unless perchance there be some legal question of inheritance to settle.

"Now," went on the priest thoughtfully, "without breaking that seal of confession, I can tell you one story of many which illustrates what I have been saying.

"It happened forty years and more ago, when I had barely entered upon my duties as curé of a small country parish. In fact, he was my first penitent.

"I can see him now, as he rushed into my little garden, where, one exquisite June evening, I was watering my roses. His boyish face was white, his yellow hair hung in damp locks to his temples, he was splashed to the waist with mud. On the thumb of the hand which held his riding-whip gleamed a great blood-red ruby set in an antique ring.

"He made me understand finally that he had something to tell me, and insisted that I should take him into the little chapel, 'where we should be safe.' Then he poured out his wretched story, telling that he had chosen to come to me 'because I, too, was young and of good blood, and would understand him.'

"He had married six months before, without the knowledge of his family, a burlesque actress of considerable beauty but doubtful reputation. At the time of his marriage, however, the boy, in his blind passion, had believed her a much-abused woman, and a good one. Tiring of pretence, she undeceived him soon after the wedding day. And then, as he could not provide enough money to keep her in luxury, she gave him notice that she should return to Paris and to her old vocation and her old life of dissipation. And, enraged by his reproaches, she further announced her intention of using in her profession the ancient and honoured name which he had given her. Mad with shame, the young man remembered the poison in his ring, a fancy of his freakish student days, and used it to avert the threatened disgrace. 'It would have killed my mother!' he said with a sob. A certificate of death from heart disease was given by the local physician, and by this time the woman had been in her grave a week.

"At the time of committing the crime, the lieutenant said, he had felt perfectly justified in it, and therefore calm; but, as I pointed out to him, the passion of anger had nevertheless blinded him. Asked whether he had slain the woman that she might be withheld from further sin, or in order to shield his own pride, he admitted that the latter was the true reason, but still declared that he could not have done otherwise. Indeed, he was not even now repentant, only disturbed and miserable. What could I say? I exhorted him to repent, and commanded him always to wear the fatal ring, as a perpetual reminder of his crime.

"I never saw him again. He sold out of the army, and, I think, left France; though I did hear a faint rumour some time afterwards that he had married again, a rich demoiselle of noble family, and had taken the name of her estate."

The Abbé's last words were interrupted by the butler's long-expected announcement:

"Monsieur le Comte de Brignolles."

A universal sigh and murmur of relief softly heralded the new arrival; the hostess went eagerly forward. A loud voice broke out, drowning her reproachful questions.

"Absolutely desolated, Madame my cousin, but believe me, it was not my fault! I have been in the house fully ten minutes. You see, the carriage broke down in one of your abominable mud-holes about a mile from here, and I was fain to bestride one of the horses and make the best of my way onward. I arrived somewhat dishevelled and muddy, as you may imagine, and so was forced to delay presenting myself for a few moments——"

Smilingly cutting short this voluble greeting, the hostess hastily presented the Count—a stout, blonde, florid gentleman, faultlessly attired—to her guests, and then the procession, forming in accordance with previous instructions, moved out across the wide hall into the dining-room, glowing with shaded light and soft colour.

The Abbé was separated from his two comrades by the whole length of the table. He sat at the hostess's left hand, and opposite him, on Madame's right, sat the Comte de Brignolles.

Dinner was scarcely on its way, the Abbé paying silent attention to his plate, yet somehow not duly appreciating its contents of oysters, alive only the instant before, when the Count leant forward, and remarked confidentially over a silver *épergne* of roses:

"I know now why your face seems familiar, father. I remember you perfectly, for I never forget a face—only you were not an Abbé then!"

You would have thought that the dignified prelate had been the culprit—he grew red and white almost as though he could have foreseen the next words.

"My cousin," said the Count, raising his voice, and glancing genially round the table, "I have been fortunate enough to meet at your table to-night a friend of my youth—my reckless youth, of which you have doubtless heard so many sad stories! In fact I was the first penitent of Monsieur the Abbé here—and I promise you I made him a confession that astonished him!"

The Count laughed loudly and emptied his glass of white wine. The soft buzz of talk began again, and the Abbé was thankful, for it drowned his incoherent reply. His neighbours found him unusually silent throughout the meal. In fact, the reverend father was completely dazed by this freak of fate.

He knew that his two friends—whose eyes he carefully avoided—were absolutely to be trusted; but he writhed, as though the hum of voices there seemed to penetrate Martel's suggestive cough and Besson's malicious chuckle. He knew also that they would already have ascertained that the ruby ring no longer ornamented the Count's thumb—it was one more thorn in his self-complacency.

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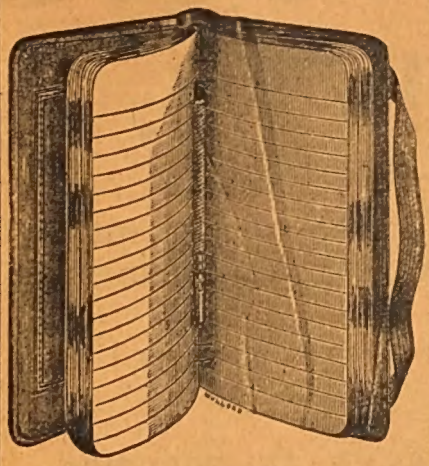

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